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Idel on Spinoza

Abstract:
In the course of his studies on Kabbalah, Moshe Idel has written on the influence of Kabbalists on philosophy. He suggests that Spinoza was influenced by the Kabbalah regarding his expressions "Deus sive Natura" and "amor Dei intellectualis." The 13th-century ecstatic Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia and many authors after him cited the numerical equivalence of the Hebrew words for God and Nature: elohim = ha-teba` = 86. This striking numerical equivalence may be one of the sources of Spinoza's expression "Deus sive Natura." The same Kabbalist used the Hebrew expression "ahabah elohit sikhlit" ("divine intellectual love"), which may underlie Spinoza's expression "amor Dei intellectualis." Abulafia's expression "ahabah elohit sikhlit" is repeated by the popular 15th-century Maimonidean philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Shalom.

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They call me a heretic and unbeliever because I have worshiped God in truth and not according to the imagination of the people who walk in darkness... I shall not forsake the ways of truth for those of falsehood.
Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*[1]

In the course of his far-reaching studies on the history of Jewish mysticism throughout the ages, Moshe Idel has often addressed himself to the influence of Kabbalistic literature on the philosophic tradition – from the medieval Maimonideans, through Pico della Mirandola and Leone Ebreo, until Franz Rosenzweig and Jacques Derrida. In this connection, he has written two important studies that have touched on the influence of Kabbalistic literature on Spinoza: one having reference to Spinoza's concept of "*Deus sive Natura*" (*Ethics*, IV, preface and 4 corollary) and the other to his concept of "*amor Dei intellectualis*" (*Ethics*, V, 32-33). In what follows, I wish to summarize Idel's arguments in these two studies, and then say some words about his approach to Spinoza.

Deus sive Natura

Idel's contribution to the history of Spinoza's concept "*Deus sive Natura*" is found in his his paper "*Deus sive Natura* – The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza."[2] In this paper, Idel focuses on the connection or equivalence in Maimonides

and subsequently in Kabbalistic literature between the words *"elohim"* (= Deus) and *"teba`"* (= Natura), and argues that this connection or equivalence is in part behind Spinoza's concept of *"Deus sive Natura".*

Idel begins by noting three striking contexts in which Maimonides associates the biblical word *"elohim"* with nature. First, Maimonides identifies *ma`aseh bereshit*, the secrets of Genesis 1, with physics or natural science, and in Genesis 1 God is named repeatedly and exclusively *"elohim"*.[3] Second, Maimonides interprets the biblical phrase "image of God" (*selem elohim*) as referring to the "*natural* form."[4] Third, he explains that the biblical description of the Tables of the Law as "the work of God" (*ma`aseh elohim*) means that they are "*natural* and not artificial."[5] In addition to these three boldly naturalistic interpretations of biblical uses of the word *"elohim"*, Maimonides also writes explicitly that the "divine actions" (Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew: *ha-pe`ulot ha-elohiyyot*) are the "natural actions" (Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew: *ha-pe`ulot ha-tib`iyyot*): "If you consider the divine actions, I mean to say the *natural* actions, God's wily graciousness and wisdom, as shown in the creation of living beings, in the gradation of the motions of the limbs, and of the proximity of some of the latter to others, will through them become clear to you," etc.[6] Idel observes that Maimonides thus saw the divine activity as *natural* with regard to the human intellect ("the divine image"), with regard to the animal body ("God's wily graciousness and wisdom, as shown in the creation of living beings"), and inanimate objects ("the Tables of the Law").[7]

Next Idel observes that the "prophetic" or "ecstatic" Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), who wrote three commentaries on the *Guide* and taught the book and its secrets in Spain, Greece, and Italy, expressed the Maimonidean identity of elohim and nature by a remarkable numerical equivalence or *gematria*: the numerical value of the words *"elohim"* and *"ha-teba`"* is identical, namely, 86. The first known occurrence of this *gematria* is in Abulafia's early book, *Get ha-Shemot* (1271). Alluding to the verse, "Then the magicians said unto Pharoah [after the plague of gnats], 'This is the finger of God [*elohim*]'" (Exodus 8:15), Abulafia teaches that nature may be changed by virtue of the name *"elohim"*.[8]

Abulafia, Idel continues, returned to this numerical equivalence between "God" and "Nature" in several other works, often with reference to Maimonides' interpretation of the Tables of the Law in *Guide*, I, 66. For example, in his *Sefer ha-Hesheq* (1289), he explains that the word *"luhot"* (Tables), when transformed according to the *atbash* code (i.e., the first letter of the alphabet corresponds to the last, the second letter to the next-to-last, etc.), becomes *"kisse'"* (Throne), and the numerical value of *ha-kisse'* (the Throne) = *ha-teba`* (Nature) = *elohim*.[9] Similar ruminations concerning *elohim = ha-teba`* are found in Abulafia's Commentary on the *Guide, Sitre Torah* (1280), on I, 66.[10]

Idel shows that the numerical identification of *elohim = ha-teba`* was cited explicitly or implicitly in many Kabbalistic works after Abulafia; e.g., Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's *Ginnat Egoz* and his Commentary on Genesis 1, Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi's Commentary on *Genesis Rabbah*, the anonymous *Eshkol ha-Kofer*, Rabbi Meir Aldabi's *Shebile Emunah*, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher's Commentary on the Pentateuch, and Rabbi Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*.[11] Moreover, Idel further shows that the numerical identification of *elohim = ha-teba`* was found even in the Jewish philosophic literature; e.g., the anonymous *Commentary on the Secrets of Ibn Ezra* (attributed wrongly to Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi), Rabbi Judah Carasani's *Aron ha-`Edut*, Rabbi Isaac Albalag's *Tiqqun ha-De`ot*, a radical treatise by an anonymous 15th-century thinker (who interpreted Genesis 2:3, "which God created to make," as meaning "Nature created from then onward"),

Rabbi Abraham ibn Migash's *Kebod Elohim*, and Rabbi Judah Moscato's Commentary on Rabbi Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*.[12]

Spinoza, Idel argues, was influenced by the *gematria* of *elohim = ha-teba`*, but he "disentangled the importance of the linguistic proof, the *gematria*" and ignored the "mystical hermeneutics." He focused on the content: God = Nature.[13]

Spinoza may not have been well-read in the Kabbalistic literature, but he was well-read in the Hebrew philosophic literature and particularly that related to Ibn Ezra and Maimonides. He was also well-read in the literature of Jewish biblical commentary. Given the widespread occurrence of the identification of *elohim* and *ha-teba`* in non-Kabbalistic texts, as well as in Kabbalistic ones, Idel's conclusion that Spinoza was aware of the *gematria* is likely.

Idel, however, goes on to ask whether it is possible to locate a particular text that influenced Spinoza regarding the identification of God and Nature. He remarks that the equivalence of *elohim* and *ha-teba`* appears is so many Hebrew books that it is difficult to isolate one source that influenced Spinoza. Nonetheless, he suggests that Spinoza was influenced in particular by Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's *Ginnat Egoz*. In this book, Gikatilla plays frequently with the equivalence of *elohim* and *ha-teba`*. In addition, Idel comments, Gikatilla also plays with the root *tb`* (the same root as in the noun "*teba`*") in ways that suggest the terms "*natura naturans*" and "*natura naturata*" found occasionally in medieval Latin philosophy (beginning with the 13th century) and significantly in Spinoza (*Ethics*, I, 29, scholium, and 31). One finds in *Ginnat Egoz* various configurations of the words "*teba`*" (natura), "*matbia`*" (naturans), and "*mutba`*" (naturata).[14]

Amor Dei Intellectualis

Idel's contribution to the clarification of the sources of Spinoza's concept "*amor Dei intellectualis*" is contained in his essay, "The Influence of *Sefer Or ha-Sekhel* on Rabbi Moses Narboni and Rabbi Abraham Shalom."[15] He draws attention in this essay to a Hebrew phrase that closely parallels the Latin "*amor Dei intellectualis*" and is found in a Kabbalistic and a philosophic text.

In this essay, Idel focuses on passages from Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's book *Or ha-Sekhel* (1285) that are paraphrased without attribution by two leading Maimonidean philosophers: Rabbi Moses Narboni (c. 1300-c. 1362) and Rabbi Abraham Shalom (d. 1492). One of these passages, the one paraphrased by Shalom, contains the Hebrew analogue to the Latin "*amor Dei intellectualis*". The passage in question from Abulafia's *Or ha-Sekhel* reads as follows:

> As among two lovers love has two parts [i.e., that of each lover] but becomes one thing when consummated, so the Name [i.e., the Tetragrammaton = *yod* (10), *heh* (5), *vav* (6), *heh* (5) = 26] is composed of two parts, which are the conjunction of divine intellectual love [*ahabah elohit sikhlit*] with human intellectual love [*ahabah enoshit sikhlit*] [*ahabah* = *alef* (1), *heh* (5), *bet* (2), *heh* (5) = 13; thus divine *ahabah* + human *ahabah* = 26], and [this conjoined love] is one . Likewise, His Name comprises "one" "one" ["one" = *ehad* = *alef* (1), *het* (8), *dalet* (4) = 13; thus "one" "one" = 26] because the connection of the human existence with the divine existence at the time of cognition, which is equal to the intellect *in existentia*, is such that

> she [the human lover] and He [the divine Lover] become one entity. This is the power of the human being that he is able to connect the Lower Part with the Upper Whole such that the Lower ascends and cleaves unto the Upper, and the Upper descends and kisses that which ascends toward it, like a bridegroom actively kissing his bride out of the abundance of the true passionate love [*hesheq*], designated for their mutual pleasure, from the power of the Name.[16]

In his philosophic book *Neveh Shalom*, VI, 1, Shalom adapts this Abulafian passage, omitting allusions to *gematria* and demythologizing it noticeably:

> This is the power of the human being that he is able to connect the Lower Realm with the Upper such that the Lower ascends and cleaves unto the Upper, and the Upper descends and kisses that which ascends toward it. This is the intent here in the phrase "ascending and descending" [Genesis 28:12]. For the [human] intellects are the [angels] *ascending* from the depths of lowliness by means of the Ladder of Wisdom, and the Separate Intellects are the ones *descending* toward them out of the abundance of the true passionate love [*hesheq*], designated for their mutual pleasure, from the power of God. In this way, the intellectual divine love [*ha-ahabah ha-elohit ha-sikhlit*] joins with intellectual human love [*ahabah enoshit sikhlit*].[17]

In the conclusion of his essay, Idel points out the "linguistic similarity" between Abulafia's phrase "*ahabah elohit sikhlit*" (divine intellectual love) and Spinoza's phrase "*amor Dei intellectualis*".[18] He notes that Abulafia's phrase refers to God's love of the human being, while Spinoza's refers to the human being's love of God.[19] Nonetheless, he argues that the linguistic similarity is significant because Abulafia and Shalom, like Spinoza after them, associate the love of God with intellectual cognition.

Idel's conjecture that Spinoza knew Abulafia's phrase "divine intellectual love" is not improbable. Spinoza almost certainly did not read Abulafia's *Or ha-Sekhel*, but he almost certainly did read Shalom's popular philosophic book, *Neveh Shalom*, which was available in two printed editions (Constantinople 1539, Venice 1574).

Spinoza's concept of *amor Dei intellectualis* is indebted to Maimonides' discussion of the "passionate love" (Arabic: *`ishq*; Hebrew: *hesheq*) of God in *The Guide of the Perplexed,* III, 51. The passages Idel cites from Narboni and Shalom allude to this chapter of the *Guide*.[20]

Pan-Abulafianism

Scholars have expounded the conceptual roots of Spinoza's phrases "*Deus sive Natura*" and "*amor Dei intellectualis*" in the Jewish medieval speculative literature.[21] Idel, however, has pointed to linguistic similarities: "*Deus sive Natura*" recalls the Abulafian gematria "*elohim = ha-teba`*" and "*amor Dei intellectualis*" recalls the Abulafian phrase "*ahabah elohit sikhlit*". Idel's linguistic arguments supplement the conceptual similarities and are made more probable by them.

In both cases, Idel has called attention to the possible influence (even if indirect) of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia on Spinoza. Idel wrote his doctoral dissertation and many

other studies on Abulafia's "prophetic" or "ecstatic" Kabbalah, and has from the beginning of his career argued for the marked influence of Abulafia on other medieval Kabbalists, on Jewish and Christian Renaissance Kabbalists, on the Kabbalah of Safed, on Sabbateanism, and on Hasidism.[22] Idel's focus on Abulafia was branded as "Pan-Abulafianism" by the Isaiah Tishby, who considered Abulafia's Kabbalah to be a marginal phenomenon.[23]

Idel has remarked on Gershom Scholem's changed attitude toward Abulafia.[24] As a young man, Scholem considered Abulafia to be the most important of the early Kabbalists. In a research report he addressed to the great Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik in 1925, he wrote of "Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, the most important personality among all the early [Kabbalists] known to us."[25] In his classic *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, Scholem dedicated the entire Fourth Lecture to "Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Prophetic Kabbalism."[26] However, after *Major Trends*, he curiously turned his spotlight away from Abulafia, and there is no article on him in his *Kabbalah*, published in 1974.[27] Idel complains that while the early Scholem appreciated the significance of Abulafia, the later Scholem generally neglected him in favor of "a monolithic and mythocentric vision of Kabbalah."[28] Idel further asserts that the attitude of the later Scholem was followed by most of his leading students, like Tishby, R.J.Z. Werblowsky, and Joseph Dan.[29]

Idel does not try to explain why Scholem changed his approach to Abulafia. I have a suspicion. I think the strong Maimonidean elements in Abulafia's Kabbalah became increasingly problematic for Scholem, who sharply contrasted the spiritually meaningful Kabbalah with "sterile" Maimonideanism.[30] Abulafia's Kabbalah exhibits a fascinating integration of radical philosophic intellectualism with imaginative numerical and alphabetical mysticism; and the possibility of such an integration of philosophy and Kabbalah seems to belie Scholem's sharp contrast between them.

Just as Abulafia was a Kabbalist influenced by philosophers, so too he was a Kabbalist who influenced philosophers. He influenced, for example, Rabbis Isaac Albalag, Moses Narboni, and Abraham Shalom; and, if Idel is right, he influenced also Baruch Spinoza, and influenced him with regard to two major concepts: the identification of God and Nature and the intellectual love of God. In his worst nightmares, I doubt Professor Tishby imagined Idel's Pan-Abulafianism reaching Spinoza.

Idel's Spinoza is not a Kabbalist, but a Jewish philosopher influenced by the medieval Hebrew speculative tradition – a tradition in which Rabbi Abraham Abulafia played no mean role. The arguments presented by Idel with regard to the sources of both "*Deus sive Natura*" and "*amor Dei intellectualis*" deserve to be considered seriously, as does his underlying suggestion concerning the unexpected connection between the 13th-century prophetic Kabbalist and the 17th-century philosopher from Amsterdam.

Notes:

1 Cited in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1941, pp. 130, 380

2 In Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine, eds., *Maimonides and the Sciences*, Dordrecht 2000, pp. 87-110. The paper was originally delivered in 1987 at the Boston Colloquium for the History and Philosophy of Science, Boston University. It was published first in French in Idel, *Maïmonide et la mystique juive*, trans. C. Mopsik, Paris 1991, pp. 105-134.

3 *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago 1963, I, introduction, pp. 6-7. Cf. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah 4:10. See BT *Hagigah* 11b-13a. The name "*elohim*" appears 35 times in the 34 verses describing the seven days of Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3). All other names of God, including the Tetragrammaton, are absent.

4 *Guide*, I, 1, p. 22. Cf. Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6.

5 *Guide*, I, 66, p. 160. Cf. Exodus 32:16.

6 *Guide*, III, 32, p. 525. Spinoza read the Guide in Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation. As Idel notes, Pines conjectured that "Spinoza's expression, 'God or Nature'...may have been, at least in part, suggested by this passage of the Guide" (ibid., translator's introduction, p. xcvi n. 66). Cf. *Guide*, III, 34, p. 534: "the Law is a divine thing [*`inyan elohi*]...natural things [*ha-`inyanim ha-tib`iyyim*]."

7 "*Deus sive Natura*", pp. 88-89. Cf. pp. 96-97 (on the divine image and natural form) and p. 94 (on the use of "*elohim*", as opposed to the Tetragrammaton, in the biblical account of Creation). See also Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006), pp. 169-215.

8 Ibid., p. 90. Idel cites Exodus 31:18, which fits *Guide*, I, 66, but the primary allusion here is to Exodus 8:15.

9 Ibid., p. 92.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., pp. 93-96.

12 Ibid., pp. 96-98.

13 Ibid., p. 101.

14 Ibid., pp. 102-106.

15 Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, Albany 1988, pp. 63-71. The essay first appeared in Hebrew in *AJSreview* 4 (1979), Hebrew section, pp. 1-6; reprinted in Idel, *Peraqim ba-Qabbalah ha-Nebu'it*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 75-83.

16 *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 66-67. Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, New Haven 2005, pp. 79-80, 277; also 199-200, 307.

17 *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, loc. cit.

18 Ibid., p. 67 and pp. 70-71 n. 18.

19 This is true with regard to the literal meaning of the two phrases in their contexts: Abulafia's "*ahabah elohit*" refers to love from God and Spinoza's "*amor Dei*" refers to love for God. However, Abulafia, Shalom, and Spinoza all speak about a two-way intellectual love in which God's love of human beings and human beings' love of God are in some sense one. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, 36.

20 See my essay, "*`Ishq, Hesheq,* and *Amor Dei Intellectualis*" (forthcoming in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Aaron Garrett, eds., *Ethica V: Amor Dei Intellectualis, Spinoza on Intuitive Knowledge and Beatitude*, to be published by the Jerusalem Spinoza Institute).

21 See the articles by Fraenkel and me cited above in nn. 7 and 20. Cf. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Spinoza*, Cambridge, MA, 1934.

22 See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine" (in Hebrew), doctoral dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976; *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. J. Chipman, Albany 1987; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (above, n. 15); *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abuulafia*, Albany 1989; and other studies.

23 See Tishby's critique of Idel (in Hebrew) in *Zion* 54 (1989), pp. 209-222, 469-491, and Idel's responses (in Hebrew), ibid., pp. 223-240, 493-508 (esp. 493-494). Cf. Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish

Mysticism," in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem's* Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism *50 Years After*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 121, 132. Tishby used the term "Pan-Abulafianism" in a comment he made after one of Idel's lectures in the mid-80s.

24 "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," pp. 117-143.

25 Gershom Scholem, *Debarim be-Go*, Tel-Aviv 1975, p. 62. This statement of Scholem's is quoted in Idel's doctoral dissertation, p. 1.

26 *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 119-155.

27 "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," pp. 120-121. Cf. *Kabbalah*, New York 1974; but see p. 467, s.v. "Abulafia, Abraham."

28 "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," pp. 117-143; esp. pp. 118-121, 123-124. Idel writes that after *Major Trends*, "Scholem's interest in the ecstatic Kabbalah radically diminished" (p. 120) and eventually turned into "total neglect" (p. 121).

29 Ibid., pp. 130-136.

30 See *Major Trends*, pp. 11-13, 28-30, 35-36, 38). Cf. my "Two Jewish Approaches to Evil in History," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, New York 2005, pp. 194-201. Scholem notes Abulafia's lifelong "admiration" for Maimonides (p. 126), but remains skeptical as to why a Kabbalist would find the *Guide* pertinent. Abulafia's assertions to the effect that his theory of prophecy is substantially identical with Maimonides' are dismissed by Scholem as "rationalizations" (p. 139). In general, in *Major Trends*, the role of Maimonides' *philosophy* in Abulafia's Kabbalah is minimized.